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ABSTRACT

This paper asks what role "play" plays in writing and how it can help a writer, whatever dread, boredom, skill, or ethnicity he/she brings to writing. Some of the ideas in the paper come from Africa, courtesy of Robert Farris Thompson. In his "philosophy of discourse" discussed in the paper, Thompson speaks of the "big picture," a culture's deep sense of how talking, listening, writing, reading (discourse) functions, operates, works, and plays--his word is "plerk," combining play and work. Style is the arrangement of language and students' writing is often the nexus for numerous impasses--impasses in society, in academics. The paper uses Thompson's book, "Flash of the Spirit," a reconsideration of African discourse, to search for a way out of the frequently grim, joyless, viciously circular, alienated zones of writing. At some point in all classes, the student writer should play with the rhythms of whatever he/she is asked to write. The following positions are taken: (1) what is written in college should be contested and negotiated; (2) students should "play off" each other's papers (co-revise); (3) students need to "own" their writing; and (4) they need to think of "big style," a way of seeing themselves and their writing wholly. The paper concludes with anecdotes about two students. Contains 9 references. (TB)

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Grammar J, As in Jazzing Around: The Roles "Play" Plays In Style

1: Play

I'm writing to share stuff with students who have adapted rather well to college writing, *thank-you-very-much*, but who may be a little bored by paper-writing. I'm writing to share the same stuff with students who haven't adapted all the way--students who, when faced with writing a paper, feel dread, confusion, maybe a little anger or *acute* boredom. Also, I have a notion that, depending on what day it is, most students are members of both camps--the adapted and the unadapted.

Some of the stuff I have to share comes by way of Africa, perhaps to some a surprising source of ideas about writing. One teacher who read a draft of this essay asked, "Are you really writing to an audience like my class [at a big state college] of two African-American students and the rest white?" I think this is a way of asking, "Will white kids get this?" It's not a question I expected, and that's a way of saying, "Any kids will get this." Well, maybe some African-American students are immediately more interested in African stuff. Some aren't. Maybe some white kids are. Many aren't. Prior interest in Africa depends on individual interests, and in any case, "Africa" is not something we need to get hung up on here because . . . . .

. . . . the key idea in this essay is **play**, which is, arguably, the opposite of getting hung up on *anything*. What role does play play in your writing, what role should it play, how can it help you, regardless of (or, in addition to) **whatever** dread, boredom, comfort, confusion, skill, and ethnicity you bring to your writing? I want to, and I want you to, play around with the idea of play-in-writing. Let me do a little set-up work first.

Who is Robert Farris Thompson, and how can he be of assistance?

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2: Language Is Our Brains, So To Speak

Let's say **style is arrangement**.

Arrangement of *language* comes naturally to almost all human beings. Two important thinkers-about-language--American Noam Chomsky and Russian Mikhail Bakhtin--agree our brains are language and language is our brains. For Bakhtin, language is that material of which utterances (stuff we say and write) are made, material shaped by specific pressures exerted by persons, groups, economic structures, history, and the great-big mess that history is.

For Chomsky, utterances well up, as it were, from a deep, preexisting arrangement; a stratum: Universal Grammar. Water from a deep spring. He doesn't mean grammar as in grammar quizzes. He means something like How All Languages Hang Together, as well as Our In-Born Understanding of How Languages Hang Together. Think of this as a language hard-drive with which all human-computers (brains) are equipped. (Ray Jackendoff has a good book that follows up on Chomsky's ideas. It's worth a look.)

We really aren't as different from one another as our utterances make us seem, it seems: the member of the British Parliament who speaks in ornate sentences and the American fourth grader speaking slang at a video-arcade own the same basic language equipment. More: the seeming differences between us (let's say I say "ain't" and you don't) aren't true differences in the pure sense but artificial ones in the artificial sense. They are differences imposed for social or political reasons, not all that different from clothing fashions, for instance: a tuxedo has certain status because people invest it with status, not because it's inherently "better" clothing than blujeans. Let's say you are predisposed to exert your will over me or pretend to be better or smarter than I am; my saying "ain't" in certain situations feeds your predispostion., *even though you understand perfectly what I am saying to you*. ("Did you hear that guy say 'ain't' at the party? What a bozo!"). If a student walks on an American campus and, without irony or self-consciousness, says "ain't" or "mens," how quickly that student is judged, pegged, pigeon-holed! Quickly? Heck, instantly. Ask yourself how you've judged someone, or have been judged by someone, based solely on the way you say a word or two.

A step further: Reading and writing (R & W) are of this world of utterances about which I've been uttering. R & W branch from Language, from our In-Born Understanding of How Language Hangs Together. When such branches do not sprout, or stop growing after they sprout, the reason in most cases is *social*. Of course, physical reasons are possible (a brain injury). But more likely, the circumstances of family, nation, class, gender, or some combination thereof prevent a particular "brain" (person) from acquiring and/or mastering R & W. The brain (the person) is in fine shape, linguistically speaking. It's just that a social obstruction of some sort is in the way. The brain, the person, is in need of guidance to get around the obstruction. Such guidance is also known as Teaching. Also known as Applied Generosity. Also known as Orientation--being welcomed, made to feel comfortable, not made to feel stupid, etc.

Who is Robert Farris Thompson, and how can he possibly help you write better?

3: The Concept of "Plerk"

And now for the notion of play-work, or "plork," pronounced *plerk*, and why don't we just work with that spelling?

Most kindergarten teachers and foreign-language teachers and some Italian teachers-of-kids known as "the Ruggiero school" know children do not know the difference between work and play as they acquire a language, something that helps account for how efficiently they acquire a language. Children don't have time for such petty differences; they're too busy learning. Work and play are fused into work-and-play, more than the sum of the two parts. Plerk. If we're feeling stuffy today, we could use the word *facility*.

Hacky-sack, skateboarding, in-line skating, shooting hoops, pinball, throwing a pot (ceramics). I'm merely thinking of things I see students do where I teach. Help me out here and think of other things you do and do easily. Something that's "plerk" for you. Hold this example in mind, and as we move through the rest of this essay, keep comparing it/contrasting it to how you write.

Word up. As kids plerk at language, *word* is heard and played back and riffed and doubled and morphed. Think back to when you were six or seven. Or observe any five-year-old. Watch how much

you and your friends play with language, make fun of weird language, mock the Statements of your parents and other authorities and so forth. This is plerk. The Russian Bakhtin sometimes called this work-play "carnival." And aren't those conversations on the playground or in those late-night bull sessions in dorms like carnivals? --Spontaneous performances of language?

This just in from our news desk: Children grow up.

But this clunker of a fact does not explain why *plerk* shrivels so rapidly in quasi-adult & adult (college) educational settings. Though in one sense college consists of little else EXCEPT writing, almost no one plays with writing. It's frequently grim work. With grim results. Mostly, college writing is a joyless affair. We might as well all dress as Puritans. (There's a reason, friends, why they call it the Protestant Work Ethic & not the Protestant Play Ethic.) *Who is Robert Farris Thompson, and can he lead us back to the Land of Plerk?*

4: Big Issues Engulf Writing

Impasse

I could tell you
If I wanted to
What makes me
Who I am.

But I don't
Really want to
And you don't
Give a damn.

--Langston Hughes

To what extent do college teachers care what makes their students who they are? Do we give a damn? Do you give a damn? Do you care what makes teachers who we are? When teachers loathe students' writing, is it because they loathe students, loathe teaching, loathe their own writing? When students loathe writing, loathe the writing tasks they have been given, is it really because they're *bad* students, *lazy* students? And what about students to whom we give A's but who nonetheless loathe writing--students who have learned to finesse the loathing? Are they the saddest cases of all? Okay, maybe "loathe" is too strong. Dread, boredom, confusion.

Often writing itself is not the issue. Often writing--students writing, students' writing--is a nexus for numerous impasses, big unresolved disagreements. Impasses in society, in academics. Such as: What is a college education for--the growth of the student, the health of the corporate world, neither, both? (To you this question's phrased *Why am I here?*) Such as: How often do you and your and teachers actually move beyond a guessing-game to reach some kind of intellectual agreement about the purposes of what's being written? How many teachers who are task-masters of writing struggle desperately with their own writing demons, including the demon of writer's block, but never ever reveal this to their students? To what degree is writing, like standardized testing, one more way to categorize, "track," pigeon-hole, and regulate the sheer masses of you students in this post-industrial society of ours? Writing, it seems to me, is almost too easy to use as a blank screen on which to project impasses of personal, social, and institutional kinds. The notion of play (plerk) opens up some paths around the impasses. *Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Robert Farris Thompson. . . .*

5: A Different Philosophy of Art and Writing And Style

Out of Africa, courtesy of Mr. Thompson, a "Philosophy of discourse." Say what? Let's say for the moment it means "the big picture"--a culture's deep sense of how talking, listening, writing, reading (discourse) functions--operates, works, plays. --A culture's deep sense of how things, including writing, are *arranged*, and remember, we said *style is arrangement*.

Let me play some selections (not sold in stores!), with my brief comments in brackets, to help us get what we need to get out of this "Africa material" of Thompson's. What I need you to do in the next

page or so is use that example of plerk (hacky-sack, pinball, whatever *thing you do easily*) & notice how it's also an example of what our guy Thompson's getting at. & Then the next step's to see how the mterial might work/does work/can work in writing. Your writing.

The first quoatation's a little textbooky, but just go with it for the moment.

****Flash of the Spirit is about visual and philosopohic streams of creativity and imagination, running parallel to the massive musical and choreographic modalities that connect black persons of the western hemisphere. . . .Among those [organizing] principles are the *dominance of a percussive performance style . . . ., a propensity for multiple meter . . ., overlapping call and response . . ., inner pulse control . . ., offbeat phrasing . . .*, [and] *songs and dances of social allusion*" (Thompson, xiii).

[Some more big terms here, I know. But don't worry. "Dominance of percussive performance style" means, for example, *heavy on the drums*. Think of Cuban music, Salsa music, earthier forms of jazz and rock & roll, rock-a-billy, Rap & Hip Hop. Thompson's basically just giving labels to elements in music that are found from Kenya to Cuba, from Chicago to Buenos Aires. PLEASE note that such elements have spread beyond music into all areas of culture produced by persons of many ethnic backgrounds.

Just look at an MTV video--of the group Salt'N Peppa, let's say, or one like it. Heavy on the beat. Overlapping voices--conversations within the song. Perhaps a couple of meters (set rhythms) overlap. And "social allusion"--references to (in this case) urban life, to predicaments some young Black women face, to social problems. This is basically what Thompson's talking about, and **no**, it doesn't have to be Rap music, so don't get hung up on that.]

***"Generosity, the highest form of morality in Yoruba traditional terms . . . ." (Thompson, 13).

[Consider how *un*generous, ungiving, some supposedly moral people are. Consider how big a role punishment and retribution (taking, not giving) play in the moral scheme of some people. Consider how fiercely some teachers seem to attack the writing of their students, as if they (the teachers) were at some level "morally outraged." *Consider how much you yourself may punish yourself as you write, how much you've internalized the unforgiving nature of criticism you've received.*]

***"The Yoruba religion, the worship of various spirits under God, presents a limitless horizon of vivid moral beings, generous yet intimidating. They are messengers and embodiments of *ashe*, spiritual command, the power-to-make-things-happen, God's own enabling light rendered accessible to men and women" (Thompson, 5).

[Don't worry. No one's advising a conversion to Yoruba religion. --Though a smart-alecky voice in me says, "It couldn't hurt!" In this quotation, it's more important to concentrate on the idea of *ashe*. Consider when something has come really easily to you--in writing, sports, music, art--that example you're carrying from earilier in this essay. Whatever you're doing just seems to happen and happen well, as if (a paradox) you were in complete control but had no need to control the flow of the thing. This is a kind of *ashe*. It's a power. It's not necessarily a gift, though. It can come from practice--from "plerking" at in-line skating, for instance, from writing comfortably in a journal or on a draft.]

***"I refer to the cone-on-cylinder as a multi-habitational unit instead of a house. It is not merely an architectural structure but a representation of the individual within his or her social universe" (Eddy, 27).

[Wow, there's a quotation out of left field. But consider how all people, but especially kids, *make rooms their own*, how the room--the living space--is a fusion of shelter and art, the practical and the emotional. Consider the power of such places. There is a force--*ashe*--in a teenager's room, like that of a magical cave. This person Eddy is thinking about such force, except in the context of certain African homes. How does this cone-cylinder deal apply to your writing? Well, a paper is like a house--it is practical and personal, work and play, directed to a teacher and others, but also springing from within. Also, chiefly through writing, you make an intellectual space for yourself in a course, at a college. You impose yourself. Writing comes easiest to you and me when the writing-process fuses the practical and the personal. If we are totally practical, working on that paper like a robot, we come up with a robot paper., complete with robot thesis. If we're totally personal, we probably won't connect with whoever is reading the thing.]

***[Of Kentucky folk-sculptor Henry Dorsey:] "Dedicating himself to work that was play, to labor that was festive, displaying his art in a communal round, Dorsey rescued objects thrown away by persons trained to see only single functions in them, recycling them in a deeper sense" (Thompson, 158).

[Dorsey took the discarded stuff around him--everything from wheel hubs to tin cans--and turned it into amazing sculpture. When we read and write, sez me, we can often see only single functions--in words, terms, concepts, even in formats (term paper, lab report, critical analysis); consequently, we often write with a kind of bored fatigue, going through the motions, picking up tin cans, throwing them in the garbage. When we find a way to make the language our own, we see multiple functions. We have room to move. The big ol' heavy term from the psychology textbook suddenly works for us in a different way; we're able to lift it, we bring it into our sense of language, use it as we see it. We cast off bored fatigue and write potently, just as Dorsey sculpted powerfully with material other people regarded as clumsy non-artistic material.]

So: the big picture here is that historian Robert Farris Thompson's work, itself a massive reconsideration of African philosophies and discourse, unexpectedly gives us a way out of our frequently grim, joyless, viciously circular, alienated zones of writing. More specifically, here's how Thompson does this:

1. As the reference to Henry Dorsey suggests, many of the African philosophies of text, visual art, textiles, music, and dance heal <u>the rift between work and play</u>. The effects of this fusion are astounding --witness the presence of blues, jazz, rhythmized textiles, etc., across U.S. culture.) More to the point, the effects dovetail with the Bakhtinian and Chomskyan ideas mentioned above (the Universal Grammar stuff); that is, they are more applicable than many of the Western philosophical ideas (including ones from Descartes and Locke, but this is just an aside) that have influenced our thinking about writing. *In the culture of college writing, there's a chasm between work and play*: That's an idea I want you to consider, and I know you can think of examples of this chasm from your own experience, as I know my students can.

2. <u>Improvisation</u>. Call and response. Off-beatedness--a deliberate, built-in, serious-and-playful irreverence toward received form. Collaboration. Fusion of the personal and the social. A recognition

of the *ashe* (power to make things happen) in everyone. We all have It--the power to make linguistic things happen. (Earlier here we called it Universal Grammar.) . . . I see it and my students see it when their writing goes well. And now that I think about it, I also see it in the way you--students--dress, mixing & matching stuff at will, playing riffs with the stuff you pull off the rack---or off your floor.

3. What drives these African views seem remarkably *postmodern* --this computerized, saturated-with-info, glutted, full-of-stuff, cross-cultural-wired, whacked-out world of ours. Funny, but as old as some of the African ideas are, they know what to do with chaos and fragmentation and information overload; they are not afraid of these things; improvisation and the "deep recycling" of Henry Dorsey's folk sculpture look at chaos and fragmentation, even alleged junk, as sources of energy, not threats to coherence or signs of decay.

One could argue that Cyberspace is a culmination of Anglo-European technological culture, but one could also arge that what Thompson calls the African "flash of the spirit" was ready all along for the hyper-flexibility and superabundance of Cyberspace. In the age of the Internet and Cyberspace, Channel-Surfing and Changing Careers Nine Times In a Lifetime, such views may be as useful as water on a desert hike.

Whatever we might think of the five-paragraph essay and its cousins, are they supple enough to thrive in the age of discourse in which we find ourselves? Even if the Internet and Cyberspace and other weirdnesses of modern life did not exist, college *itself* would still be fragmented. How strange and potentially wonderful but nonetheless fragmented it is to attend a politics class at 11:00, eat lunch in a cafeteria, conduct a biology experiment at 1:00, and start drafting an anthro paper at 5:00--after lacrosse practice. The scheduling gives it all a veneer of logic, but from another angle it's surreal, so on every campus there's a need for flexibility & play as you write your politics and biology papers, write a computer program, write a job application--all in the course of a day. Play is not incidental but vital.

6: You're Not Here

Oh, I **do** wish you were here, in my office, foggy day in the Pacific Northwest, a big fir tree outside the window of my pig-sty office (speaking of cylindrical houses & other weird spaces). --Wish

you were here to talk about specific things you've written, are writing. --Writing that's gone well & not gone well. How as writers you've adapted & not adapted. And we could banter and mumble about **rhythm**, **contest**, **collaboration**, and **possession**--and **plerk**. But you're not here, and by this time I'm some-place else, too. So the fall-back position is for you to talk back to the next few paragraphs, bring them into your own workshop of ideas, strip them for parts, reassemble them according to writing you're doing right now, according to what kind of writer you think you are today.

Rhythm. Whether we're talking first-year writing, sociology, bio-lab-reports, memos or graffiti, language exists in time & is a timed thing--*rhythmed*. At some point in all classes, you should play with the rhythms of whatever you're asked to write, getting at least elbow-deep into the movement of the text. If, for example, your sociology text seems somehow leaden, writing in the rhythms of that sociology text can at least make the text more familiar. I'm calling for something more than imitation and something less than (or different from) parody. An Elvis impersonation as opposed to an Elvis impression! I'm calling for something as simple as rewriting and jazzing-around-with a particularly sociologistic sociology sentence, a real Max Weber humdingerism. You should be invited into such a sentence before you are asked to understand it. Invite yourself. Crash the party of expert language.

Moreover, in this video-saturated culture, don't you think you oughtta be editing your own videos, should "write" videos instead of and/or in addition to papers? "Mike and I have a video due tomorrow" should be heard as often as "I have a poli-sci paper due tomorrow." What are the rhythms of this video-computer-culture and why aren't you writing and rewriting those rhythms? It's crazy not to. It can be as simple as proposing experimental projects in place of traditional ones.

And of course writing-as-a-process, the act of writing, is timed thing, too. A classic college-lore example is of the person who waits till 2 a.m. the morning before a big paper's due to start on the paper. This is like starting a song at the end of the song, the rhythm of the writing process wrecked. More usefully, just look at the larger rhythms of your own writing-act sometimes. How could you smooth them out, synchronize, or syncopate them differently? What are the parts & are the part moving well together?

There's a rhythm to work days and vacation days. There's a rhythm within that unit/those units of time in which you write.

Contest. What is written in college should be contested. You and your teachers should yammer and jabber about assignments, with playful but serious irreverence. Negotiate. Both sides should be willing to take as much as they give. You should (in a perfect world!) always feel free to ask why you're being ask to write what they write, and teachers should feel free to jettison old assignments--or to stick by them, IF they seem relevant to the "plerk" of learning. But the web of each class should include strands of contesting, flexible power-negotiations, contested & improvised "papers." Obviously, you shouldn't bang your heads against the brick wall of obstinate professors, especially if your grade depends on it, speaking of bottom-lines. But if you see opportunities to negotiate, seize 'em. Be a player.

Collaboration. We know about this, don't we? Peer-review, workgroups, and such. But take it further. Students should play off of one another's papers, co-write, co-revise, revise professors' prose, codesign paper topics. "But what does this do to our concepts of plagiarism and our systems of grading?" Exactly. I'm not encouraging plagiarism or academic dishonesty, but I am encouraging you/us to question how you/we define "authorship." And look at the so-called Real World. Ensemble writing is the rule, not the exception. Scientists, lawyers, judges, text-book writers, insurance adjustors, business persons, politicos, film writers--it's all ensemble writing! There are no singly authored annual reports or legal briefs or political speeches! The Declaration of Independence was not independently written! The Constituition was a group presentation! The Internet and Cyberspace have only accelerated the process to the speed of light. Why do we cling so desperately to the old ox-cart of single-authorship. I'm not saying banish the singly-authored paper; I'm just saying, "Get real," and after getting real, use the reality of ensemble writing as an opportunity and an occasion, a mode of pedagogy.

Possession, a sporting idea: *It's your play, the ball is in your court, change of possession*. As hinted at by **contest** and **collaboration** above, you need to own the writing you do, just as you "own" your personal example of plork (pinball? sailboarding? ceramics?). I'm convinced, after 12 years in the thick of all sorts of college writing, that much so-called "bad" student writing springs from lack of ownership.

Even after you've completed a paper and the writing's gone fairly well, aren't there times when the finished product seems to belong more to the professor than to you?

Do whatever you can to own the things you write, to make "assignments" your own, just as an actor takes a role & runs with it. If the assignment looks and feels like a stupid tin can, look at it from a different angle, the way folk-sculpturist Henry Dorsey would.

Possession also means possessing the language. When Dorsey picked up a fan belt or a roll of wire, he possessed it, made it his, redefined its function and meaning, recycled it into *his* (and his culture's) vision and visual text, re-presented it to the world--surprise! When you buy a flannel shirt, you make it *your* flannel shirt by rolling up the sleeves, by what you wear it with, by spilling paint on it, etc. You similarly need to possess the language of disciplines and courses, make it your own, drink it in, reshape it. Hence the need for rhythm-play, contesting, collaboration, too.

Play as in **Big Style**. The Buddhists speak of Big Mind. We need to think of Big Style, a way of seeing ourselves and our writing wholly. Instead we often still think of style as a series of small, surgical, "tasteful" word choices and authorial dance-steps. Strunk and White's Elements of Style is the wildly famous Bible of such surgery. Take a gander at page 70, though, where Strunk and White advise . . ." 1. *Place yourself in the background.* 2. *Write in a way that comes naturally.*" Um, what if the way that comes naturally is to put myself in the foreground? Um, what if my teacher, who after all is THE reader, wants me and the pronoun "I" in the foreground? Um, my friend got an A on her philosophy paper, but I read it and it didn't seem "naturally" to me.

Hey, The Elements of Style is a sharp little book with some interesting advice, but it sprouts up from the loam of an unacknowledged Big Style---middle-class New England, where terseness and understatement are a way that comes naturally, where The New Yorker is the talk of that particular town. The book is the elements of *A* style. Maybe in some cases the precise writing surgery it advocates is useful, probably in other cases it isn't. What I'm saying is, let's acknowledge the Big Styles behind the little styles we advocate, and let's look around for other Big Styles. What I'm saying is, always ask questions about the Big Style in which you're asked to write papers. How did the style come into being?

What do you like and not like about it? "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," says the alleged Wizard of Oz. Big Style is the person behind the curtain. Ask teachers to talk about this style, about what they see as its purpose, its strengths and weaknesses. Ask, in a nice way, what's behind the curtain.

7: Wayne and Jonathan and You

In an essay like this it's tempting to reprint chunks of students' essays or a whole essay as An Example, but I want to resist the temptation because I really want you to turn to your own writing & writing practices, and a lot of what we're kicking around here has to do with avoiding templates & formulas & elements of strunks, has to do with personal , specific playings-out of Grammar-J-Jazzing-Around, has to do with picking up the instrument--your own writing--& playing, performing your own writing, as it were & as it is. On the other hand, knowing how much some readers like An Example, I'll compromise & give a couple anecdotes about Wayne and Jonthan, but it's the maneuvers the two made--not so much their actual papers--that are key.

Wayne: a couple of weeks into the course, he let it be known he had to earn an A because his parents demanded it. His attitude toward writing was grim and joyless, and my not-so-grim-and-joyless attitude toward teaching and writing only made him more grim. Why? Because "the rules" had changed. I wasn't the sort of English teacher he expected. He wanted a formula for what I expected. Instead, he found himself in a classroom culture that invented itself. Often I'd ask the class what was on their minds; they'd find a subject; I'd incite them to argue and cavort. Out of this petri-dish of opinion, outrage, laughter, and debate would come a subject sometimes. Wayne didn't like this---the class determining the subject, the sense that paper topics and paper-shapes were negotiable, the sense that things were in flux, everything from audience and purpose to what might happen in the next class session. He didn't really go for peer-review of drafts, either. He saw himself as a lone wolf, competing in college by and for himself. This was how he had learned to thrive in high school.

Not intending to, I began one session by asking about drugs on campus. A good twenty years away from my own undergraduate experience, I just found myself curious that morning about who

ingested what and why these days. Much to my surprise, and to the hilarity of everyone in the room, tales sprang up of rather widespread mushroom use. Little bands of students apparently roamed the football field at night; football fields in the Pacific Northwest grow mushrooms. The discussion ranged from there to less comic topics--self-destructiveness, students dropping out, the contrast between the public-relations image of colleges and the reality of Generation X. The discussions seemed so rich I said we should probably write about "drugs on campus." Then, I said, I wanted to throw at them a deliberately awkward essay format--a "report" that would break abruptly in two parts. In part one, they would give their assessment of the drug "problem" or "situation" on campus. In part two, they would offer recommendations or observations. I told them it was a "findings and recommendations" format that one often had to wrestle with in all sorts of jobs. I wanted them to wrestle with it, find a way to make it work for them, get inside it. Combining the energy of the discussion with the de-energizing format was an experiment in writer's alienation I wanted us to go through. The class wasn't thrilled, but they understood the experiment and took possession of it from an experimental point of view. We negotiated from there.

Wayne broke through. He repositioned himself from Dutiful Son and Academic Lone Wolf to--well, to Wayne, a living, breathing citizen of *that* particular writing culture. This is how his essay began:

"This is your university. This is your university on drugs."

Marvelous. Playful. Playing a riff on the famous fried-egg commercial. (Remember Mr. Thompson's phrase, *songs and dances of social allusion*?) Playing with language. Playing with a key idea that came up in the discussion--the contrast between public relations and campus reality. Hinting at the combination of comedy (student roaming the football field pretending NOT to be looking for mushrooms) and tragedy (dropping out, stoned and lost) of drug use. His essay took off from that smooth runway and touched down several wonderful pages later. --Wonderful mainly *for Wayne* (forget my reader's pleasure) who fused work and play, found the power to make things happen, spoke his mind, who played off the class discussion, wove together strands of language from many sources--television, campus talk, standard English, Hawaiian slang. Style! Wayne's style. The larger style of the classroom

culture.. Style as the particular class in a particular course with particular things to write & words moving through time across the page, across drafts and computer screens, across Wayne's life as Wayne's life moved across the life of his parents, across the life of "an education." Movement, work, play; off the beat and on the beat; calling out a subject and responding to it, responding to others who call out their opinions and outrages.

By shifting his stance just a little, Wayne shed that boredom, dread, and/or fatigue most students feel, that thing I talked about at the beginning. He took a line from a TV commercial, something most people would deem inappropriate for a college paper, and like the sculptor Henry Dorsey, he *made* it appropriate. He turned it into a thesis, for heaven's sake!. Do you see the move Wayne made, how the move was rooted in lots of stuff happening in class and with Wayne before "the paper" was ever an issue? Wayne--finding a way to **possess** the paper. Giving himself a chance **to make things happen** there in the first sentence of his paper. Being **generous** to himself, giving *himself* a break from the grim work of writing. Taking a television line and playing it back in a different song altogether. Turning writing into "plork."

And no, I'm not saying that everything should be a riff or a joke. In the same class, a student I'll call Jonathan wrote a paper about the film, "Come See the Paradise," which is set against the backdrop of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Here is a sentence from his first paragraph: "The synopsis of the movie on the back of the laser-disc jacket alludes to the fact that the main focus of the story is not the injustices of the internment or the hardships endured, but the attempt of Jack to gain the acceptance of Lilly's family." This is more of an academic sentence, yes? There are ways to make it smoother, to play with it. But I liked it a lot. It's a real sentence, written with authority. It begins to crack open this movie for us--can you feel that happening, even if you haven't seen the film? I like the way Jonathan demystified the assignment and talked about the concrete reality of looking at the jacket of the laser disc, and I liked how he used this concrete fact as a step to his thesis, which is that romance in the movie obscures some vital history. In his own way, not Wayne's flashier way, Jonathan made that particular assignment his own. Picking up the dust jacket, looking at it not as a

dust jacket but a way to get to his essay's main point (think of folk sculptor Henry Dorsey)--this, too, is a form of plerk, of improvisation and possession. His playing with the conventions of an opening paragraph is more serious, more academic, let's say. But it is still play in the sense of making the writing his own. "Plerk." It is still Grammar J, let's say--**contest**, **rhythm**, **collaboration**, **work-play**, **improvisation**, **possession**. Make it *your* grammar j.

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